DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 212 362 PS 012 623

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TITLE A Review of the Elementary School Promotion/Retention Dilemma.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 23p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Decision Making; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *Grade Repetition; Guidelines; Literature Reviews; Self Concept; *Student Adjustment; Student Promotion; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present different aspects of the effects of grade retention on students and to consider what is best for the total development of the child. Studies show that grade retention does not ensure significant gains in achievement. However, studies seem to be less conclusive regarding retention due to the immaturity of students. Teachers and parents appear to favor nonpromotion when necessary because it improves their children's school adjustment. Despite the findings of some studies, teachers and parents do not believe nonpromotion harms children's self-concept. Research also supports this view. The threat of nonpromotion is not a motivating force for students. Nor does retention increase more homogeneous groupings of children in classrooms. Studies indicate that classroom conduct and socioeconomic status affects the decision of nonpromotion of students. Because of the complexity of the issue, rational decision-making scales are being developed to assist those determining the child's advancement. Also, alternatives to nonpromotion such as half-step promotion, readiness classes, non-graded programs, and individualized instruction are being implemented. When the decision not to promote a child is made, support from parents, teacher and principal is needed, the child should be assured that he or she has not failed, and the student should be provided a different teacher during the repeated year. (Author/RH)

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# A REVIEW OF THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROMOTION / RETENTION DILEMMA

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A Review of the Elementary School

Promotion / Retention Dilemma

The problem of grade-to-grade promotion vexes elementary school teachers every year. If teachers were to make a list of their most difficult decisions concerning students during the school year the question of grade placement would certainly appear. The decision to promote or retain is influenced by many factors. General education philosophies have great impact on this concern. However, such philosophies are constantly changing, which also poses additional conflicts. The "Back-to-Basics" movement is one example. The mastery of basic subjects is essential in some areas of the school system. Some educators feel that minimum standards of performance must be obtained in order to progress. Some students may need extended time to master the skills expected at a grade level. Retaining a child will give him this extra time to learn what is needed. To pass them on when they have not mastered necessary skills is an admission of failure. When there is a system of social or automatic promotion many students will not study simply because they know they will be promoted. Because children learn at different rates of speed, they are entitled to extended time when needed. This is the logic for those who favor the retention of students.

On the other hand, there are educators who strongly oppose non-promotion. They feel that retention harms more students than it helps. They argue that students who repeat a grade achieve less than those who have been promoted. Discipline problems seem to be greater among retainees. Retention lowers IQ scores. There is a high correlation

between nonpromotion and dropout rates. Teachers who are pressed for accountability tend to retain students more frequently. The practice of retention is used to create more homogeneous classes. The question of harming self-concept is a major issue. There are those who believe that low achieving children appear to be able to accept the fact that others are more capable than they are. But to force them to reidentify with a class of younger children produces long-lasting negative consequences that may not always be measured by relatively short-range subjective evaluations. Retained children may develop negative attitudes. They may feel inadequate and inferior. They may withdraw and become depressed. It is often a devastating experience from which they never recover. These educators do not favor academic achievement at the expense of social growth.

There are many viewpoints concerning this issue and there are valid arguments on both sides. This paper presents different aspects of the effects of retention on students and considers what is best for the total development of the child. Studies that were designed to investigate this puzzling situation are surveyed and important factors that can assist educators in determining philosophy and policy affecting promotion and retention of students is discussed.

Review of Literature

The problem of nonpromotion began about 1840 when elementary education was divided into eight grade levels. Theoretically, as a student mastered the content area of one grade level, he would pass on to the next higher grade. In the early twentieth century, educators became concerned for students who, unable to master the material at their

particular grade level, faced the prospect of nonpromotion. Nonpromotion is simply the practice of allowing a child to spend two consecutive school years in the same grade. However, retentions have decreased substantially over the last fifty years. Data from the literature on elementary school nonpromotion indicate the following: 1) boys suffer retention nearly twice as often as girls do, 2) grade retentions occur more often for children with problems in learning, behavior, and emotional health, and 3) elementary school retention often precedes dropping out of school. Regional variations in rates of elementary nonpromotion indicate the South and East rank higher than those in the North and West (Safer, Heaton, and Allen, 1977).

Currently, more than thirty states require school systems to test students before they can graduate from high school, before they are promoted from one grade to another, or both. This idea was pioneered by the small Greensville County school system in Virginia. This system attracted national attention when the school board became one of the first in the United States to abolish social promotions and require students to pass standardized tests before they could pass to the next grade. The trend has continued because of current frustration over high school graduates who cannot read, write, or add. The Gallup poll taken in 1978 indicated 68% of those queried favored promotions from grade to grade only if children could pass an examination. Eighty-one percent of the respondents said they would require students to take remedial classes in subjects failed (Thompson, 1979). Naturally, competency testing requires additional funds for test development, test administration, and remedial costs.

Bocks (1977), however, points out a number of studies which do not support the idea of nonpromotion as a means to greater achievement. As early as 1911 a seven-year study was done by Keyes in a school district of about 5,000 pupils. He discovered that of the large number retained, 20% did better, 39% showed no change, and 40% actually did worse. Burnette Buckingham, in 1926, found that only about 1/3 of several thousand children did better work after repeating a grade. B.T. McKinney studied repeaters in grades above the first and found that 35% of the repeaters did better work the second time, 53% did not improve, and 12% did poorer work. It appears from these studies that the majority of the pupils who repeat a grade will achieve no better the second time in the grade than they did the first time. A substantial number do poorer work the second time around (Bocks, 1977).

Bocks also concluded that the practice of nonpromotion, as a device to ensure greater mastery of elementary subject matter does not receive support from the following research findings. In 1936, Grace Arthur compared the achievement of 60 first grade repeaters with the achievement of nonrepeaters of the same mental age. She discovered that the average repeater learned about the same in two years as the average non-repeater learned in one year (Arthur, 1936). In 1956 Coffield and Blommers discovered that slow-learning children who are promoted, ultimately perform on about the same level when their performance is compared in the same higher grade, in spite of the fact that the failed pupils each spent an extra year in attaining this higher grade. Klene and Branson, in a study made in Long Beach, California, in 1929, equated children, all of whom were to be retained, on

the basis of chronological age, mental age, and sex. Half were then promoted and half were retained. They concluded that, on the whole, potential repeaters profited more from promotion than did the repeaters from nonpromotion, interms of measured achievement. In 1933, Farley, Frey, and Garland found that children with low IQ's who had repeated several grades were not doing as well in their schoolwork as children of the same ability who had been kept with those of approximately their own age. Nonpromotion was more likely to be a deterrant than an impetus to acceptable achievement (Bocks, 1977).

Another major reason for retaining a student is immaturity. A child who is not mature enough to succeed in his grade may profit from an additional year to grow and mature. If all children matured at the same rate and could enter school at the same age, retention might not be necessary. However, this is not the case (Horn, 1976).

In most cases, persons who use the social immaturity reason for nonpromotion believe that it is beneficial socially for the youngster to repeat a grade. Anfison studied 116 pairs of junior high school pupils who were matched on school attendance, chronological age, sex, intelligence, and socioeconomic status. One of each pair had been regularly promoted while the other had repeated the previous grade. Anfison found that the regularly promoted students were significantly better in their personal and social adjustment (Goodlad, 1952). Sandin, in 1944, studied the social, behavioral, and emotional results of nonpromotion through the use of tests, ratings, and interviews. He found that the retained children on the average are likely to choose companions in grades ahead and would like to join them there. Children

who made slow progress tended to regard their younger classmates as inappropriate companions. These children did not often receive the social approval of the regularly promoted and, on most behavior traits, teachers rated them less favorably than those in the normal progress group. Other children are inclined to describe these slowly progressing children as more likely to be unhappy, grouchy, quarrelsome, rude, and selfish (Bocks, 1977).

A study by Goodlad reports that the promoted children were rejected significantly less by classmates as persons not desirable for very best friends. He says the whole picture of sociometric change over the school year was one of decline in desirable adjustment for the nonpromoted children and of improvement for promoted children. Morrison and Perry found that discrimination against overage children varied considerably at different age levels and was most severe in grades four, five, and six. In general, a definite degree of non-acceptance for overage children was found in this study. These studies which have examined the social outcomes of nonpromotion point to many harmful consequences. Nonpromotion, for the reason of social immaturity, does not receive broad support from these research findings (Bocks, 1977).

Sandin reported that children who had previously been failed said that their parents had been angry, that they had been spanked, or that they had been lectured on the need for studying harder. Brothers, sisters, and relatives had criticized their shortcomings and failure was a continual sore point to be brought up for conversation from time to time (Bocks, 1977).

On the contrary, Ames reports a study conducted by Verne Lewis who questioned over 400 parents of children who had repeated a grade.

Lewis' results showed that 90% believed that retention was justified, 89% said they never regretted this move, 88% said they would make the same decision again, and 87% felt that the good effects definitely outweighed the bad (Ames, 1980).

Ames also reported a second study by Joan Ames Chase. The topic of this research was the success of retaining 65 first, second, and third grade boys and girls as judjed by teachers and parents. Teachers felt that retention had met the needs of 75% of the children and had produced no emotional upset whatsoever in 78% of them. They found only temporary upset in 67% more. Ninety-five percent of the parents favoring retention, reported that children liked school better and felt more confident and successful than they had the year before (Ames, 1980).

A minisurvey was conducted among a group of primary teachers in a northwestern Ohio elementary school which permitted retention for reasons of immaturity. When asked about the children they had retained because of immaturity, all teachers said that they supported retention as a school policy. They estimated that over 80% of those students who repeated were helped. No teacher felt that any child was severely damaged. Furthermore, they indicated that retained students developed better self-concepts through success found during the second year. The teachers felt more children were damaged by floundering in a grade for which they were not ready; and, that these children would feel a great sense of failure which could become even greater as they grew older (Horn, 1976).

A survey of students who had been retained the previous year re-

vealed that the children felt good about themselves; that they believed they were doing as well or better than they had been during the previous year; and that they felt either the same or better about their school work than they had the year before (Horn, 1976).

The impact of poor achievement on self-concept has received considerable attention in literature. A study by White and Howard in 1973 examined the relationship of self-concept and retention. The two used data collected by the North Carolina Advancement School on more than 600 sixth graders from a variety of school systems. They divided the students into three groups; those who had never failed a grade, those who had failed once, and those who had failed more than once. They then compared their self-concept scores. They found that failure was significantly related to lower self-concept and that this relationship was most pronounced for the students who had failed more than once. A low correlation between students' self-concept scores and intelligence, they noted, indicated that intelligence had little to do with the variance in self-concept scores (ERIC Clearinghouse, 1979).

However, many educators support the notion that failure in school may result in negative self-concepts among children. Recent research has highlighted an important relationship between a pupil's self-image and his achievement. Unquestionably, being identified as a failure by the school environment can impede a youngster's future achievement and self-esteem. Harry Finlayson conducted a longitudinal study of the effect of nonpromotion upon the self-concept of pupils in primary grades. He followed the children through the 1973-74 and 1974-75 school years. In the first year, the sample group consisted of 585 first grade pupils who had never been retained. During the second

year the research included groups of nonpromoted, borderline, and promoted pupils still attending the selected schools. Each group contained 25 pupils because that was the number not promoted. In an attempt to highlight the effect of nonpromotion on the self-concept of the pupils between the promoted and nonpromoted groups, an intermediary or borderline group was selected by classroom teachers at the end of the first year. These pupils displayed the same characteristics (maturity, achievement, attitudes, behavior) as the nonpromoted pupils, but for various reasons they were promoted to the second grade. The borderline pupils were equated with teacher judgment and mental ability. The pupils' self-concepts were measured on four separate occasions by the investigator during the two year period. The instrument used to measure self-cocept was the FACES Scale. This scale contains 18 questions about feelings toward family, school, friends, and self. The results of the study were that after nonpromotion the group of retained pupils continued to increase their self-concept scores significantly, while scores of the borderline and promoted groups dropped slightly, but not significantly during the second year of the study. At the fourth measurement period, the self-concept scores of the nonpromoted and promoted groups were virtually identical. It seems clear that the fact of nonpromotion with subsequent repitition of the first grade experience did not negatively affect the self-concept of the experimental pupils (Finlayson, 1977).

Supplementing the self-concept data from the FACES Scale were two teacher questionnaires, a parent questionnaire, and an in-depth, follow-up parent interview designed to highlight the effect of non-

promotion of the first grade youngsters in this study. The questionnaires secured facts and opinions bearing on the nonpromoted pupils' self-concepts and any effect that nonpromotion may have had on their self-image from the classroom teachers' and parents' perspectives. The findings from the teachers' perspectives were that approximately 75% of the pupils recommended for retention manifested a positive self-image prior to the fact of nonpromotion, the self-concepts remained stable or became more positive during the first school year in every case; eighty-four percent manifested a positive self-concept in the classroom after nonpromotion; and 96% of the cases during the repeated school year remained stable or became more positive. Parents of the nonpromoted children were asked to express their opinions regarding retention on the basis of how it affected their child. Data was collected through questionnaires and interviews. More than half of the responding parents stated that their child liked school more than he had the previous school year and found going to school easier than the last school year. A majority of the parents viewed their retained children as being more confident, more successful, and happier during the nonpromoted year. Given the nonpromotion situation and decision a second time most parents said that they were in favor of nonpromotion and would make the same decision. Nonpromotion does not appear to be a practice that negatively influences self-concept (Finlayson, 1977).

Finlayson felt that the few research studies conducted on the question of retention and its effect on the self-concept of the child are inconclusive. Typically, nonpromoted pupils in the upper elementary grades were compared with pupils who have never experienced nonpromotion.

Usually the two samples were matched on sex, ability, achievement, and other variables thought to be influential in the development of a youngster's self-concept. Self-concept assessments were administered only once and then the data compared. Studies utilizing this type of research design do not answer the ultimate educational question; that is, whether a poor self-concept contributes to school failure or whether school failure contributes to a poor self-concept. He believed the only way to explore this dilemma was to study children before they had failed and follow their self-concept development after the fact of nonpromotion. Therefore, he used the later basis to conduct his research study (Finlayson, 1977).

Very often the threat of nonpromotion is used in the belief that it is a motivating force. Many teachers feel that youngsters will quit working if they get the idea that everybody is going to pass. Otto and Melby put this to a test with second and fifth grade students. They found that children in the experimental groups were told that they would be promoted regardless of their efforts made slightly more progress on the comprehensive achievement tests than those in the control groups who were told that they would not be promoted if they did not work diligently. This study demonstrates that the threat of nonpromotion is not a motivating force (Smith, Krouse, & Atkinson, 1961).

Elementary teachers feel a concern for the wide range of abilities that confront them in their classrooms. It is a fairly common belief that retaining youngsters who are not performing to a predetermined standard will help to alleviate this problem. Studies by Goodlad, Coffield, and Cook all report basically the same finding, that nonpromotion

does not appear to reduce the range of specific abilities with which teachers have to cope (Goodlad, 1952).

Another aspect of nonpromotion that needs exploration is whether a student who has not been promoted or who has failed secondary school subjects is likely to drop out of school earlier. Evidence seems to indicate that there is a positive relationship between school failure and early drop-out. Although this relationship is difficult to determine because compulsory education laws have a tendency to affect the rate of drop-out, individual school districts should evaluate their own drop-outs to see whether any relationship exists (Smith, Krouse, & Atkinson, 1961).

Nonacademic considerations often contaminate decisions to retain students. Exploratory studies suggest that conduct and socioeconomic status affect retention decisions. In 1973, Caplan noted that far more boys than girls are identified as problem learners and speculated that conduct and sexual norms influence this determination. She sought to examine the influence of these factors on decisions to retain students in a study of 50 promoted and retained students matched according to age, sex, race, and grades. In accord with the ratio at which boys and girls are retained, 40 of the students were boys and 10 were girls. She found that the promoted girls received significantly higher marks for behavior than the retained girls and that the mean behavior rating for the retained girls was lower than that for the retained boys. The groups of boys showed no behavioral difference. Caplan concluded that girls' classroom conduct seems to be a crucial consideration in their promotion and retention and added that aggressiveness among girls attracts special attention because it counters sexual norms.

She suggests that girls' behavior may influence teachers' judgments in this way, aggressiveness may lead teachers to underestimate girls' abilities while conformity, the expected behavior, may lead teachers to neglect their learning problems. This study unfortunately used a very small sample and provides only limited data, but it does suggest problems that demand further consideration (Caplan, 1973).

With regard to socioeconomic factors which influence the rate of nonpromotion in elementary schools, Safer, Heaton, and Allen conducted a study using three economically different areas of a suburban county. They found that the average frequency of nonpromotion in elementary schools of a fairly affluent county runs three times greater in the blue collar areas than it does in the white collar areas (Safer, Heaton, & Allen, 1977). In 1971, Abidin, Golladay, and Howerton reviewed the dynamics of retention decisions in a study of 85 students who were retained in the first two grades and 43 regularly promoted students who scored below the twenty-fifth percentile on the Metropolitan Readiness Test. They discvered that the retention decisions could not be explained in terms of any differences in the students' abilities, conduct, or grades. Earlier research and their demographic data suggested that the students' parents played an important role and ultimately pointed to sex, race, and socioeconomic status as crucial determinants of retention decisions. Black male students from low socioeconomic families in which the mother worked and the father was absent stood greatly increased chances for retention. The authors concluded that retention is largely a discriminatory policy against the poor (ERIC Clearinghouse, 1979).

Lieberman has developed a decision-making model to determine if a student should be retained. Four categories for each factor are possible; for retention, against retention, undecided, and not applicable. The factors themselves are not weighted because it is the individual student who might give weight to the factors. The factors are divided as follows; Child's Factors - physical disabilities, physical size, academic potential, physchological maturity, neurological maturity, child's self-concept, child's ability to function independently, grade placement, chronological age, previous retentions, nature of the problem, sex, chronic absenteeism, basic skill competencies, peer pressure, and child's attitude toward retention; Family Factors - geographical moves, foreign language emigrants, attitude toward retention, age of siblings, sibling pressure, and involvement of family physician; School Factors - school system attitudes toward retention, principal's attitude toward retention, teacher attitude toward retention, availability of special education services, availability of other programmatic options, and availability of personnel. The purpose of this model is to promote rational decision-making on the part of the school personnel and parents with regard to retention (Lieberman, 1980).

In 1977, H.W. Light proposed a procedure for determining the suitability of retention for a particular child. It is referred to as Light's Retention Scale. He suggested 19 categories of data that comprise the variables of the scale; the student's sex, age, school attendance, intelligence, present level of academic achievement, physical size, siblings, previous retention, history of learning disabilities,

attitude about possible retention, parent's school participation, motivation to complete school tasks, history of delinquency, knowledge of the English language, present grade placement, transiency, emotional problems, experimental background, and immature behavior. Each category is accompanied by a paragraph-length description and justification for inclusion. The scoring and mechanical use of the scale is straightforward. A simple rating scale is used with each category, and a composite total is related to an overall index. The author rightfully cautions that the scale is an approximation and in no way constitutes an exacting index. Light's Retention Scale possesses moderate merit, largely because it represents a coherent and organized approach to a persistent concern; indeed, as a result of recent suits attacking schools for social promotion, it is now an imminent concern for public education. However, the scale is not without major flaws, among which is a genuine paucity for supportive research and an absence of standardization indices to support the scale's validity, reliability, or probable range of interrater agreement (Miller, 1978).

Discussion

Research concerning the topic of nonpromotion is very diverse. However, a few generalizations can be stated. Although one of the major reasons given for retaining a student is lack of subject matter mastery, inquiry shows that retention does not ensure significant gains in achievement. Despite increasing public pressure for students to achieve minimum standards of performance in order to advance from level to level, nonpromotion does not appear to be the answer.

Studies seem to be less conclusive regarding retention for reasons of immaturity. Some investigators feel that nonpromotion is very harmful to the social development of the child. Others believe that retention may be the panacea for those students who need some additional time to mature emotionally and socially, as well as academically. Teachers and parents appear to agree that they are in favor of nonpromotion because they have seen the benefits in their children's school adjustment. Despite the findings of some studies, a large majority of teachers and parents do not report negative results with regard to self-concept. There is also research to support this view. Even so, the controversy shown here demonstrates the need for further study into this serious issue.

The threat of nonpromotion does not prove to be a motivating force for students. Nor does retention increase more homogeneous classrooms for teachers. Research does tend to imply that there is a correlation between school failure and drop-out rate. Studies indicate that classroom conduct may have some influence upon whether or not to retain a child. Socioeconomic status also affects the decision of nonpromotion of students. Because of the many factors which need to be considered concerning the nonrpomotion decision, rational decision-making scales are being developed to assist those involved in determining the fate of the child's advancement.

Conclusions

A variety of alternatives to retention have been proposed and applied in different school systems. One such alternative is the system used in Greenville County, Virginia, where students are grouped by age as well as achievement level. When a pupil does not master a

particular grade, he is assigned to a split grade or half-step promotion with other over-age students. As soon as his achievement level sufficiently improves, he is promoted to the next full grade.

Non-graded programs are also being initiated to ensure against the harmful consequences some feel develop from nonpromtion. Others insist that the only solution to this problem is individualized instruction. An alternative to retaining a child because of immaturity might be "transitional maturity" or readiness classes for those who did not develop needed skills prior to academic learning. However, teachers tend to continue the practice of retention. Therefore, certain guidelines need to be followed in making this critical decision. Most importantly, each child should be considered individually. All factors involved should be taken into account when determining the child's placement. In making the decision to retain a child, support from parents, teacher, and principal is needed. It is crucial to include the parents in the decision-making process. Throughout the school year, the teacher should keep the parents well informed of the child's progress. It is helpful for the teacher to suggest this possibility to the parents at a mid year conference as soon as the teacher determines that such placement would be helpful for the child's social and academic growth. Helping the parent feel comfortable with this decision is a major step in helping the child feel comfortable.

In most cases, a child's emotional reaction to being retained depends largely on the way in which the parents break this news to the child. The situation must be handled positively. He should be assured that he has not failed. To avoid the ill effects of negative

reinforcement, the teacher should not threaten retention nor refer to it in the classroom. Individual attention should be given to the student to ensure that his second year is not simply a repitition of the first. It is also recommended that the student have a different teacher during his repeated year. A child may feel embarrassed at first, but it is up to the adults to help him deal with this. His fears and reservations can be discussed to help him understand and feel more comfortable with his retention. Self-enhancement groups can be established to provide opportunities for retainees to share common feelings about repeating, improve socialization skills, and increase self-confidence. Hopefully, embarrassment then should give way to positive feelings as the child experiences new successes resulting from increased maturity.

There seems to be a need for in-service programs acquainting teachers with the research on this topic along with alternative possibilities. At the very least, schools do need to have written policies for teachers to follow to assist them in determining the promotion and retention of students.

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